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Developments in Indochina

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State Dept. review
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DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA

(Information as of 1500)

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SOUTH VIETNAM

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The Saigon government anticipates increased Communist military activity once the US withdraws.

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A brief truce has been agreed upon at Tonle Cham. The government plans to release [redacted] political prisoners on Monday, almost half of them Buddhists. A Communist spokesman in Paris expressed optimism about the bilateral talks with Saigon.

NORTH VIETNAM

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Hanoi orders its moviemakers to shape up.

CAMBODIA

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Route 5 is open northwest of Phnom Penh, but enemy units remain in the general area. First Minister Hak does not agree with the government's interpretation of last weekend's events.

LAOS

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Fighting continues in the Thakhek area. Elsewhere there are only isolated shellings and clashes.

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SOUTH VIETNAM

25X1 The Saigon government is expecting an increased Communist military effort once the US withdrawal is completed.

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25X1 [redacted] Saigon fears the aim will be to inflict maximum damage on the South Vietnamese before there is an opportunity for US intervention.

Communist preparations for an increased level of military operations in the next month are evident, but there are no firm indications of plans for a massive country-wide offensive such as Saigon fears.

Much of the government's apprehension has been fueled by [redacted] reports that the North Vietnamese intend to resume hostilities within the next several weeks if there is no progress on the political front. A rallier in the delta last week claimed COSVN has told its military units "to be prepared" to mount a new offensive against the government if the two sides do not reach a political settlement by 28 April. Other reports, particularly in the northern provinces, forecast renewed Communist attacks closer to the 28 March deadline.

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The Military Situation

Both sides have agreed to a brief truce in the Tonle Cham area, starting early on 24 March. The truce calls for a meeting of local Communist and government commanders and removal of dead and wounded. Ranking Viet Cong and South Vietnamese officers are being flown into Tonle Cham from Saigon. The Communists have reportedly stipulated that the government cannot resupply or reinforce the camp during the truce.

Communist shellings of Tonle Cham decreased sharply on 23 March. No new fighting has been reported from the Rach Bap outpost closer to Saigon, and fighting has ebbed along the Cambodian border in the western delta provinces. Continued Communist mortar fire against Tri Ton District center may have been responsible for the sudden departure from there this morning of the Hungarian and Polish members of the ICCS team.

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Amnesty for Political Prisoners

The government is about to release some controversial political prisoners--a move that may improve relations with some of its critics.

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Nearly half are Buddhists chosen from a list submitted by a leader of the An Quang Buddhists, the country's strongest opposition group.

The continued imprisonment of Buddhists has long been regarded by An Quang leaders as one of their

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[Redacted]

biggest grievances against the government. The amnesty would follow Thieu's attendance earlier this month at the funeral of An Quang's titular leaders--a gesture well received by the Buddhists.

These actions will cause the Buddhists to look a bit more favorably on the government. Nevertheless, significant An Quang grievances remain and their suspicions of Thieu run deep. The government has indicated that not all Buddhists are being released, and those who are will still have restrictions on their rights as citizens.

Former presidential candidate Truong Dinh Dzu and former Lower House deputy Tran Ngoc Chau are also among those to be released next week. Neither Dzu nor Chau has much of a personal following within South Vietnam, but their cases have been widely and sympathetically publicized in the West. There had been earlier indications that Chau would be turned over to the Viet Cong as a Communist collaborator, but Thieu reportedly now says the former deputy will have a choice of going to North Vietnam or staying in the South under restrictions. The new releases probably are partially aimed at toning down the Communist campaign for the release of all civilian detainees. The Communists, who have been claiming that Saigon holds up to 200,000 political prisoners, are sure to condemn the move as a drop in the bucket.

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Communist Optimism

Le Chan, head of the North Vietnamese information office in Paris, appeared optimistic that the Communists will achieve their aims at the bilateral talks begun recently outside Paris. In support of his optimism he cited the following "critical factors":

--the "large number" of North Vietnamese troops remaining in South

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Vietnam "will insure respect for the peace accords and support the PRG if it finds itself in trouble vis-a-vis Saigon."

--many neutral leaders in South Vietnam and abroad are either in sympathy with the PRG or are so opposed to Saigon that they represent an asset to the Communists.

--Chan also claimed that the bargaining position of the PRG had improved in recent weeks. He freely admitted the "substantial role" being played by North Vietnamese troops in support of Viet Cong forces.

He was clearly trying to impress his audience by portraying the Communist position in the strongest light. It is evident, however, that the Communists see the NVA presence in the South as their hole card in the negotiations with Saigon and intend to use their presence and potential for combat as leverage to secure government concessions.

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NORTH VIETNAMHanoi Sharpening Use of Media

Underscoring the importance Hanoi attaches to the impact of the media, Truong Chinh, president of the National Assembly and Politburo member, recently criticized motion picture producers for turning out an inadequate product. Describing movies as "one of the sharp tools of the revolutionary struggle," Chinh said the motion picture service had not sufficiently reflected "the realities of combat and the struggle of our people." A simultaneous editorial in the party daily on the same subject criticized movie-makers for a "lack of understanding of party guidelines and policies and the failure to closely associate cinema with the new life." The criticism also conveys Hanoi's concern that the North Vietnamese media have not kept up with the growing awareness and sophistication of the Vietnamese audience. North Vietnamese authorities recently instructed the party daily, *Nhan Dan*, to heighten the sophistication of its presentation and broaden its coverage, candidly admitting that the traditionally packaged jargon might not be getting people's attention.

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CAMBODIAThe Military Situation

Government forces on 23 March reopened Route 5 northwest of Phnom Penh against only light resistance. There is no evidence, however, that enemy troops have withdrawn completely and they may again try to interdict the road or harass truck convoys using it. In the Phnom Penh area, Khmer insurgent forces are keeping pressure on government positions along Route 1 north of Neak Luong. Two more government positions about ten miles northwest of Neak Luong fell on 22 March, and Route 1 is now cut in two places between Phnom Penh and Neak Luong.

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There may be an increase in insurgent activity even closer to Phnom Penh. A recent rallier claimed on 21 March that four insurgent battalions were assembling northwest of the capital in preparation for heavy shellings of the city's airfield and the headquarters of the Cambodian Navy.

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Some High-Level Concern

First Minister Hang Thun Hak told Ambassador Swank on 22 March that he does not fully agree with the official view that the events of last weekend represent a Communist-Royalist plot against the government. Hak also indicated that he believes the government's political base is too narrow, and is

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thus willing to keep pushing some of the reforms he recently advocated as a way to recoup some of the regime's lost support. Hak added that only Lon Nol could implement these reforms, and noted that once the President embarked on a course of action--such as the crackdown on dissent--it was hard to change his mind.

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LAOSThe Military Situation

There are still frequent cease-fire violations in an area southeast of Thakhek, but little territory has changed hands. In the latest fighting, Communist units on 20 March launched several attacks against government positions near Route 13, and government troops on 22 March retaliated with artillery and ground attacks. Farther south, inconclusive skirmishing continues in the Sedone Valley northeast of Khong Sedone. In the north, the Communists have been harassing government troops in the hills near Muong Soui, and on 22 March shelled and attacked government outposts some ten miles northwest of Bouam Long.

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